

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL TOM JAMES, COMMANDER, 4TH BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 3RD INFANTRY DIVISION SUBJECT: IRAQI SECURITY FORCES
MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 12:30 P.M. EST DATE: THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 2008

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COL. JAMES: Is this Jack Holt?

MR. HOLT: Yes, it is.

COL. JAMES: Hey, this is Tom James. How are you doing?

MR. HOLT: Well, very good, Colonel. Thank you for joining us here for the Bloggers Roundtable today.

Colonel Tom James is with us. He's the commander of 4th Bridge Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division.

Welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable, glad you could join us today, sir. And if you've got an opening statement, we're ready for you. COL. JAMES: Well, absolutely. Well, thanks for having me. I do have an opening statement and then I'd like to answer questions afterwards.

MR. HOLT: All right, we'll -- we can do that.

COL. JAMES: Okay, this is my opening statement. Good evening, I'm Colonel Tom James and the commander of 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 3rd Infantry Division based out of Fort Stewart, Georgia, as you just heard.

First, I'd like to thank all of you for the opportunity to talk to you tonight about Vanguard area of operation. Task Force Vanguard consists of over 3,000 tremendously talented soldiers. We assumed responsibility of our area of operation from 425 Infantry out of Fort Richardson, Alaska on 1 December of '07, and we conducted full-spectrum operations so far for the -- about 97 days to date. So, 1 December we took over. We've been here operating for 97 days.

Our operation -- our area of operation encompasses North Babil province, and stretches from the Euphrates River Valley in the West to the Tigris River Valley in the East. Our area spans just over 40,000 square kilometers, and it's roughly the size of Switzerland.

The decisive point is the town of Iskandariyah -- because of the Shi'a-Sunni balance, its location on the major southern avenues of approach up into Baghdad, and its large industrial complex; and it also has agricultural around -- agricultural areas around the town as well. We also have transition teams and

contingency plans that cover operations south into the town of Karbala, Najaf and Hillah.

Our mission is to secure the population; interdict accelerants moving up into Baghdad; defeat extremists and neutralize resistance groups; build the capacity of the Iraqi security forces, government institutions and economic programs. And while doing this, also work to transition security and local development tasks to the Iraqi security forces and local governments.

The current security situation is stable, and I am optimistic about the future. Sunni extremists are severely disrupted. They no longer find sanctuary and support from the population. We attribute the current security situation to three major reasons: First, our counterinsurgency strategy adjustment and surge deployment; second, the Iraqi security force capability; and third, the third is the Sons of Iraq program.

And I'll expand on these three reasons: First, we are living with the population. The five-brigade surge gave coalition forces the resources required to concentrate combat power in extremist-dominated areas, and allowed us to occupy key terrain in these areas to avoid enemy reoccupation. Our brigade permanently occupies 15 distributed locations. We have patrol bases, which are Coalition Forces with Iraqi army; we have three joint security stations, Coalition Forces with Iraqi police; and we have seven different forward-operating bases throughout the battle area. We also provide six military transition teams that work with four Iraqi brigades and two Iraqi battalions. And, as well, we have 10 police transition teams that work with 15 Iraqi police stations.

These forward locations and transition teams facilitate partnership with Iraqi army and the Iraqi police, and provide greater maneuver flexibility, and allow us to receive and process more human intelligence from the population. We have found that when the people know that the Coalition and Iraqi security forces are living with them, they feel more comfortable providing information on extremist activity.

Secondly, the Iraqi security forces have improved significantly. The difference between their capacity during my last deployment and now is truly amazing. Most of these organizations are capable of processing intelligence and executing precise independent operations.

Thirdly, the Iraqi population is tired of their families being terrorized by extremists and have stepped up to secure their neighborhoods. The Sons of Iraq program employs local Iraqis to secure their neighborhoods under the supervision of local tribal leaders, and overwatched by Iraqi security forces.

We use these static security positions to thicken our security lines in areas where we cannot fully commit Coalition or Iraqi security forces. We currently have just fewer than 10,500 Sons of Iraq employed in our area that mans -- (background noise) -- 552. checkpoints.

And it's important to note -- (background noise) --

MR. HOLT: Excuse me. Excuse me, sir. We've got -- we've got some cross-talk on the line.

COL. JAMES: Okay.

MR. HOLT: Is there a line off the -- the phone off the hook?

Q Somebody's called in from a place where there's a big crowd.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

(Background noise.)

COL. JAMES: (Off mike.) -- whether there's a place with a big crowd.

MR. HOLT: Yeah, we're getting some -- we're getting a lot of cross-talk across here. Oh, stand by here just a moment, sir. COL. JAMES: Okay, sure. No problem.

Q Well, it's gone now.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. JAMES: I can still hear it.

STAFF: Are we good?

MR. HOLT: Okay, I think -- well, I think we're back now.

COL. JAMES: Okay, I just mentioned the third reason why the security situation is so much better with the Sons of Iraq program. And we have 10,500 Sons of Iraq employed in our area of operation that man 552 checkpoints, and this includes both Shi'a and Sunni participants.

To this point, I've focused on the Sunni threat. We also have a Shi'a extremist and criminal threat in our southern portion of our area of operation. But the Shi'a threat is neutralized, based on precise, intelligence-driven operations executed by Iraqi police and Iraqi army, as well the welcomed Sadr cease-fire that has recently been extended.

The brigade combat team has conducted numerous operations focused on extremists and criminals over the past two and a half months.

In December, we conducted Operation Marne Roundup, a successful combined operation -- combined meaning Iraqi army and Iraqi police, combined with our Coalition Forces. It was a combined operation to clear al-Qaeda in the Euphrates River Valley west of Iskandariyah, in the vicinity of the town of Khidr.

During the operation, and with assistance of Sons of Iraq and local citizens, we killed approximately 18 extremists; captured 25; found and cleared 51 improvised explosive devices, and found and cleared 43 caches. We established Patrol Base Kelsey, which is named after a soldier that gave his life during this offensive operation.

Since we established this patrol base, over 100 families have returned to their homes. We initiated numerous projects, to include rubble removal, school refurbishment and electricity repair, and we also assisted the Iraqis in organizing local sheikh councils that capture the needs of the people.

Just south of Khidr is the town of Jurf al-Sakhr. Four months ago, it was a war zone dominated by extremists. It is now a secure community with positive governance and economic growth. An active police station and Sons of Iraq program secure the area, and over 40 businesses are growing, based on small-business education and microgrant stimulation. This is a model community concept that we'll adopt throughout the area of operation. Just the other day, I was at Jurf and witnessed a government-funded road crew paving a once war-ravaged street.

We continue relentless pursuit of the enemy and denying extremist sanctuary throughout our AO. Over the past 97 days, we conducted over 78 combined operations; captured over 50 high-value enemy targets; and cleared over 120 caches; and cleared over 70 improvised explosive devices. As security continues to improve, Iraqi security forces are able to take the lead in providing security for the Iraqi people.

As all of you well know, the recent Arbayeen religious observant pilgrimage serves as an excellent example of the tremendous progress that the Iraqi security forces have made, and their high-level of capability and competence that they possess. They developed and executed the plan to secure approximately 9 million pilgrims as they converged on Karbala for the Shi'a religious observance. The event was preceded by more than a week of travel of many pilgrims who came from -- they came to Karbala from all over Iraq, as well as other locations in the world. Within Iraq, millions traveled through Baghdad, Najaf, Hillah and Iskandariyah to reach the Muslim holy city. During which time the Iraqi security forces led an unprecedented operation to secure the festivities, deploying a total of 39,000 soldiers and police to man checkpoints, secure routes and collect intelligence.

There were 80 Iraqi security force checkpoints established within Karbala and the surrounding areas. And while there was some attacks that did take place -- including a tragic suicide bombing attack of the Sunni Iskandariyah, the fact that millions were able to travel freely, through the security provided entirely by the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police, serves as a testament to their tremendous capability. And I'd like to add one note: That their ability to react, once this suicide bomber detonated his charge, was also a great sight to see and to see the effectiveness of how they took charge of that situation.

With the security window of opportunity opened, we continue the exploitation phase, focused on governance and economics. We have an embedded reconstruction team resourced with governance and economics experts. Mr. Howard Van Branken (sp) is our EPRT leader. He and his team are essential parts of the brigade combat team and we include them in all operational planning and execution.

Under economics they focused on developing small businesses, agricultural associations, poultry and fish farms, and reconstruction projects. And under governance, they focused on local governance, training, governance linkages, and work with the Beladiya, the public works and essential services organization within the government. And they assist in this.

Under future operations, we began just recently at the beginning of this month Operation Marne Rugged. This operation is one in a series of operations in the Task Force Marne area of operations focused on clearing AQI from the Tigris River Valley -- Operation Marne Thunderbolt, focused on Arab Jabour, to our northwest; Marne Grand Slam, focused on Salman Pak to our

northeast, and our Marne Rugged will focus on the Tigris River Valley between the Samaraa jungle and Suwayra, just south of these particular operations.

Based on the success of the two operations to our north, we envision up to 30 AQI fighters potentially crossing the Tigris River and attempting to blend with the population between the Samaraa jungle and Suwayra.

Operation Marne Rugged is a -- will be a combined, or is a combined operation focused on clearing these extremist elements in the Tigris River Valley, establishing a combined patrol base on an extremists' avenue of approach, and developing actionable intelligence through engagement with the local population. We will also assist with the Iraqi security forces' governance and economics systems as we build capacity in this area. The force organization for this operation will include an Iraqi army -- correction, two Iraqi army battalions and one coalition battalion. We estimate about 30 days to clear the area and establish this patrol base. We continue to set the conditions through engagement with Iraqi security forces and the local tribal leaders, and this month we will begin the clearing operation.

In conclusion, our ultimate goal, which we share with our Iraqi security force partners, is a free, safe, and secure area of operation with a strong representative government that enjoys positive economic growth. We know we have a great deal of work ahead of us, but I can report tonight that our campaign is on track. We'll continue our focus on maintaining security and creating governance and economic opportunity.

I cannot close without mentioning the superb work by our outstanding soldiers and the sacrifices of their wonderful families. Their ability to adapt rapidly to extremely complex situations never ceases to amaze me.

I want to thank you again for this opportunity to speak to you tonight. That completes my opening statement. What are your questions, please.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Chuck Simmons, you were on line first, so why don't you get us started?

Q Yes, sir. Colonel, thank you. Chuck Simmons from America's North Shore Journal.

During the recent festival with -- I believe you said 9 million folks headed down to Karbala and Najaf?

COL. JAMES: That is --

Q That's a substantial part of the adult population of Iraq. How do you prepare for something like that? Here in the United States, we don't have events like that.

COL. JAMES: Absolutely. You know, that's a -- that 9 million represents male, female, children. It was an incredible sight to see.

I was heavily involved in it because Karbala is in our over-watch area, and the majority of these routes traverse through our AO, our area of operation. And so I was in tight coordination with the Iraqi army and the Iraq police. And, you know, it almost doubled the number of participants this year from last year. And so what I did is we worked very hard in rehearsals with the Iraqi

security forces, and it was -- what they have done is they have learned over the years how to apply the security checkpoints along critical routes. They analyze where the concentrations of people will be and where the extremist threat could be to these dismounted movements south to Karbala. And as well they have security rings around the shrines in Karbala.

So it was -- the whole operation was completely planned by the Iraqi security forces. They invited us in to join into their rehearsal, which they did a magnificent job with. And they also established clear command and control to allow this to happen. And so you had Iraqi police and Iraqi army checkpoints along the routes in, and then you had Iraqi army and Iraqi police ring -- security rings there at the festival site. And then there is a degree of self-policing as well. It was a sight to see, and it was well done by the Iraqi security forces.

Q Were these folks mostly on foot or in buses or --

COL. JAMES: They were all -- most all of them were on foot going down to Karbala, and then once the observance was complete, they moved by trucks, vehicles, trains, all kinds of modes of transportation north back to their homes, wherever they may be. So it was a combination -- foot down south, and vehicles moving back home.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Andrew.

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin from military ONPoint.

How are you doing again, sir?

COL. JAMES: I'm doing good, thank you.

Q Good. Hey, I have two questions for you. Basically, how is -- (McKebe, Steve) -- doing in Musayeb? And overall, can you talk to us about the security levels and Musayeb in -- specifically?

COL. JAMES: What was the first part of your first question about Musayeb?

Q About -- (McKebe, Steve) -- how is he doing running Musayeb? As the small consul general from your group?

COL. JAMES: Okay. You know, I don't know him that well.

Q Oh, okay. He was the young man --

COL. JAMES: I can't --

Q Yeah, you and I met him when we were down with General Lynch back in January, and he was being promoted and he was the -- he taught himself Arabic, as a matter of fact. Was kind of your liaison down there.

COL. JAMES: Okay. I gotcha. I can talk to you a lot about Mr. Jabar (sp), who is the Qatta (sp) council chairman of Musayeb and I could talk to you a little bit about the security of that area as well.

Q Okay.

COL. JAMES: You know, Colonel Mohammed (sp) is the Shi'a police chief. Are you familiar with him?

Q Yeah. We met him.

COL. JAMES: Okay. Yes. They're doing a superb job, and the security level in Musayeb is, from the time I was here back in July for our PDSF and now, has improved enormously. We have had no attacks in the last month down there, and the security situation continues to be very stable. We used the term "neutralize" when we talked to the Shi'a threat in Musayeb in the southern portion of AO Vanguard. And it's primarily just because of the active operations by the Iraqi police and of Colonel Mohammed (sp) and, as well, the Iraqi army that's just south of Musayeb.

We have a company organization -- Major Steve Kapart (ph) is the commander of it -- that partners with Colonel Mohammed (sp) out of the security station there in Musayeb. And the area there is really -- the security situation is stable. I go down there and we visit every two weeks, and it's good. And what you see, based on that security situation, is progress.

There are an enormous of projects. The roads are being paved. We've got an active newspaper going now in Musayed and the Qatta (sp) Council there is becoming more and more effective. You know, the council chair, months before we actually took our AO here, was an extremist that was on one of our wanted lists. And he has now fled out of the area and no longer has any control or ties to the Qatta (sp) Council. And it's Mr. Jabar that has taken over and stepped up.

It has equal representation of the nahias, of the smaller neighborhood councils that link into Musayeb, and that's all working. And it's working because of the security situation -- very positive situation on security and Musayeb and as well the (Siddha ?) area, just south.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: And Andrea?

COL. JAMES: Absolutely.

Q Yes, sir. I have a question about the MiT teams and both partnership. Could you walk us through maybe how you're employing MiT teams in partnership to enhance -- or, excuse me, to train the ISF, enhance their capacity, and then transition security to them?

COL. JAMES: I sure can. You know, we have -- I'd like to start with the 8th Iraqi army division, and that is Major Joel Ruthman (sp) is the commander, and his headquarters is in Diwaniyah. And we partner with him and we have a MIT team that works directly with that division, that links into our brigade, because the 8th ID footprint really covers all of our area of operation.

And then we have four MIT teams that cover down on his internal brigades. His first brigade headquarters is in Najaf. His second brigade headquarters is in Mahaweli, just south of -- or, just north of Hillah. His 3rd Brigade is out -- way out in al Kut, and his 4th Brigade is just north of Karbala. And so we have MIT teams that are linked and they're teams of

between 18 and 20 people -- depending on which MIT -- that perform all of the staff functions. And they link into these brigade organizations.

We also have two MIT teams that are covering down on battalions that are operating in our area here in North Babil, but they tie in with these battalions and brigades and they work several things. They work the training, the work -- they assist with operations and they work to assist with equipment fielding as required -- depending on whether it's a new battalion or a more mature battalion. And we track those by training readiness levels as we work very closely with them.

And so as they improve over time, we make those assessments based on their capabilities to plan and execute operations. And then based on that, over time they become more independent and then we can work the transition and the over watch of it. And we have seen -- it's been very successful.

One of the things that we have done to help with the Iraqi army -- and the Iraqi police as well -- is we formed a NCO -- a noncommissioned officer academy here at FOB Kalsu. And we cycle through two or three classes -- well, actually, it's one to two classes a month. And the NCOs from the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army come up here and are trained in leadership and fundamental skills.

And it's a participatory event with the Iraqi army and Iraqi police. They provide instructors. It's not just they're coming here so coalition forces can train them. It is a collaborative partnership effort, which has been very effective in training the Iraqi army. And so that's one piece of it.

The other piece is, as a brigade commander, I have partnership with the four brigade commanders and the division commander. And we coordinate combined operations throughout all of our area. We don't do anything without the Iraqi army or the Iraqi police anymore. There's no just strictly coalition force operations, which has been a major success in our area.

And so just working with those teams to develop them and work to the point of transition -- you know, transition is kind of hard to pinpoint "at this date we'll transition this area to an Iraqi force". It's conditions based and you have to look at the threat, the capability of the Iraqi security force, and the capability of the government to interact with all of that to help manage that. And so we're getting very close in a lot of areas in AO towards that, but we continue to track it with those MIT teams.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

David.

Q Hi. It's David Axe from "War is Boring". So how are the SOIs getting along with the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army in your area?

COL. JAMES: They're getting along fine.

It's interesting, because part of our SOI program is as you set them up, there's an over watch that you work -- that we work with the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army. We have several joint checkpoints where we have Iraqi police on checkpoint with SOIs, and they manage those SOI checkpoints in their areas.

And we have roughly a little less than a third of our checkpoints are Shi'a-Sunni -- or correction -- are Sunni. So we have at least a third that is Shi'a. And so that's a very important note that we have a combination there. You see that more because we have Sunni to our north and Shi'a to the south of our area. And so we have two-thirds that are Sunni checkpoints. We have a third that are Shi'a checkpoints. And then in the middle there are some joint checkpoints as well. So that is a very -- that's a big new story for us. And we continue to work that very carefully.

But the Iraqi police interact with the SOIs, and so far we have seen a very positive relationship. And you know, some of the concern could be that you've got a good chunk of the SOIs are those Sunnis that have reconciled and have stood up to protect their neighborhoods. And then what we've worked very hard on is having a balanced police force of Shi'a-Sunni that are just really Iraqi police and that's what we focus on. And that helps that engagement and the coordination between the two. And so far we seem to be very effective. The Iraqi police work the checkpoints around the city and internal to the city. The Iraqi army works those areas external to the cities in the farming areas and the old extremist areas outside of the cities in our AO and they over watch and partner with those Sons of Iraq checkpoints.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Jarred.

COL. JAMES: Absolutely.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you.

If you could talk a little bit about this division between the SCIRI and the Mahdi Army and the problems that have been in the past few months as far as internecine squabbling amongst the Shi'a and how that situation's going on right now.

COL. JAMES: Absolutely.

You know, as you look at that -- you know, I can only focus on AO Vanguard and what I see. You know, talking at the political level is somewhat past my foxhole.

But I can tell you that, you know, you have groups that are influenced by ISCI and those that are influenced by OMS -- you know, the ISCI arm being the Badr and OMS being those -- the Shi'a supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr. And what we look at that is -- there's really just -- the bad Shi'a are Shi'a extremists and they're not defined by any of those groups anymore.

You know, when Sadr talked about his freeze and continuation of his ceasefire, it was a very positive thing for us, because he showing that the way ahead is peace, not violence. And we're seeing that for the most part throughout our AO. And it's been very good to the south in the Shi'a areas where we don't see extremist activity. And I see a lot of that being because of the precision of the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army, but also related to the ceasefire as well -- it has been a high impact on it. So I don't see any frictions in those -- correction -- the government organizations and the religious portion of the Shi'a. So far that's been very stable in our area. And you know that Sadr is working very hard to be a political organization and trying to focus on the peaceful side of that. And that's what -- it's been a

very positive impact on the security window being opened to the opportunity that exist in our area.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Richard.

Q Hi. Good morning, Colonel. Richard Miller from Talk Radio News.

I'm wondering if you could answer the following, and just, of course, keep the answer to your AO. And that is, if some national command authority essentially withdrew -- U.S. or other coalition forces -- out immediately and your Iraqi colleagues found themselves essentially operating now alone, how well do you think they'd do at present, and how well do you think they'd do, say, within a year from now?

COL. JAMES: I'd like to take that one in terms of our AO, as you described earlier.

What I think is interesting -- I've got to take it back just a second to the surge strategy. You know, when we pulled in the five brigades for the surge strategy -- well, that was a force commitment. The strategy was really the counterinsurgency fight where we decided that we needed to get out and be with the population and take the fight to the enemy and hold the terrain. You know, clear, control and retain the area was the key adjustment there.

But what that allowed us to do is it bought us time that was required and it did several things for us. It allowed us to concentrate coalition forces in support of the Iraqi security forces. And then while doing that, we were able to attrit the force -- the enemy force, the extremists, both Shi'a and Sunni -- to a level while we were consistently building up the Iraqi security forces -- the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police -- to the point now where if we were to reposition forces in our area, I believe that we have been successful to the point where the enemy threat is low enough and the Iraqi security forces have improved enough to where they could handle that over time.

Now, I can't give you a specific date. I can just tell you that it's very positive the momentum that we have in that area. And that over time, it's conditions based, that we could pull back and allow the Iraqi army and the Iraqi security forces to handle the area. There's obviously some areas where they could do it better than others. But in general terms, they would do quite a good job in our area. It's a good news story for the Iraqi police and Iraqi army in North Babil -- in our area.

So I'm convinced that over time that they will be able to take this on. So if we were to have to pull a portion back, they would be able to execute effective security operations on their own. And you know, Arba'in is just a great example of how they're able to do that. You know, 9 million pilgrims moving south and headed to Karbala with minimal incidents. As a matter of fact, in the area around Karbala there were no incidents of significance. So that just goes to show they're capable of securing things on their own.

Q Thank you, Colonel.

MR. HOLT: Okay. We're just about out of time here. Just one quick round -- any follow-ups?

Q Yes, sir. I have a quick follow-up.

Are your MIT teams entirely sourced from external -- externally to the brigade or did you augment them in some fashion?

COL. JAMES: Yes, ma'am. I'm just making sure I do the right math in my head.

We have external MITs from IAG -- Iraqi Assistance Group -- and we have internal MITs that we've created ourselves. And we have created three -- three internal MITs from our brigade organization that are executing operations. And all three of those MITs are covering down on Iraqi brigades. And so that kind of gives you an idea.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. JAMES: Let me make sure -- I've got one more thing to say: It's four now, because we just created another one that I failed to count. So we have four internal MITs that are supporting operations.

And you know, it's really a great deal for us, because of that linkage. You know, these MIT teams work directly with that brigade or battalion staff and are directly tied in with us as well. And so the information sharing and the ability to provide reconnaissance assets or aerial assets as required -- it really streamlines that and makes it effective, more effective.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And since we are just about out of time, do you have any closing comments for us?

COL. JAMES: Well, I do. I just wanted to thank everyone for letting me be here tonight and talking to you. And I appreciate all your questions. You know, I'm very proud of Task Force Vanguard and the 3,000-plus soldiers that are out on point.

What amazes me is we call this the spectrum of action where you have to be in an environment where you have to either go lethal or non-lethal -- sometimes potentially simultaneously. And our soldiers do a magnificent job of being able to adapt. They have wonderful families that support them on these long deployments that are so hard. And I'm just honored to be here.

And I did just want to say -- you know, reiterate what I was talking about earlier that this window of opportunity here -- we call it with our Iraqi counterparts: 2008 the year of opportunity. And it's largely because of the Iraqi security forces and what they've been able to do and will continue to do. I see them improving every day. And I see this -- the momentum they have -- as being irreversible.

Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Colonel Tom James, commander, 4th Brigade Combat Team with us on the Bloggers Roundtable today.

Thank you, sir, and we look forward to speaking with you again.

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